

THE SOVEREIGN GOD AND
THE MYSTERY OF HIS WILL:
A STUDY OF EPHESIANS
(LESSON TEN)
“THE MYSTERY OF GOD’S WILL”

EPHESIANS 1:3-9

3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ:

4 According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love:

5 Having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will.

6 To the praise of the glory of his grace, wherein he hath made us accepted in the beloved.

7 In whom we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace.

8 Wherein he hath abounded toward us in all wisdom and prudence;

9 Having made known unto us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure which he hath purposed in himself.

In verses **8** and **9** of **Ephesians** chapter **1**, the Apostle Paul continues the statement that he commenced in verse **3**. Verses **3-14** actually constitutes one long statement concerning God’s purpose and plan as it relates to our salvation. The statement is divided into its component parts, each of which contributes something original and important, yet intimately related to all the others.

In verse **7**, he adds another component part to his grand “salvation song:” *“In whom we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace.”* He tells us that the degree of God’s forgiveness of sins is controlled by the riches of His grace.

As if that were not enough, Paul takes us even higher in verses **8** and **9**. He says, *“Wherein he hath abounded toward us in all wisdom and prudence; Having made known unto us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure which he hath purposed in himself.”* Paul is telling us here that not only is God’s forgiveness of sins controlled by the riches of His grace, but the riches of His grace have abounded toward us!

The **King James Version** reads, *“Wherein he hath abounded toward us.”* This, however, is not the most fitting way to translate the verse. It is clear that Paul intended the word “abounded” to be associated with the *“riches of His grace,”* and therefore, a better rendering would be, ***“Which he has caused to abound toward us.”*** The **English Standard Version’s** rendering of verses **7** and **8** provide us with a good sense of Paul’s train of thought: *“In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight.”*

Clearly, the Apostle wants to emphasize the way in which God’s grace has abounded toward His elect. The word “abounded” is the translation of a Greek word which means “to exceed a fixed number or measure, to be over and above a certain number or measure, to exist in abundance, to super-abound.” Paul is informing us here that the riches of God’s grace was manifested to us in super-abundance. In other words, he is saying that God’s grace is an oversized grace. It is a “more-than-enough grace.” It is more than enough to save and to keep saved for all of time and eternity, every sinner who comes to God in Christ Jesus.

The Greek word translated “*toward*” is an interesting one. The word is **eis**. This word means more than merely toward. It means “in or into.” It indicates that the riches of God’s grace not only reaches **toward** the believing sinner, but reaches **into** his or her very being. The grace comes not only towards us, but it grips us in its irresistible working, and brings us into salvation and preserves us in salvation!

Paul says that God’s grace has abounded toward us “*in all wisdom and prudence.*” The words “*wisdom and prudence*” are significant. The Greek word translated “wisdom” is **Sophia (sof-ee’-ah)**. **Liddell and Scott** notes that **Sophia** was “was a great word with the Greeks. With them, the word included the ideas of cleverness and skill in handicraft and art, skill in matters of common life, sound judgment, intelligence, practical wisdom, learning, speculative wisdom, natural philosophy and mathematics.” The noted Greek scholar and Anglican Archbishop Richard Trench, says that **Sophia** is recognized in the New Testament and in Christian writers as expressing the highest and noblest in wisdom.” The American New Testament scholar, **Joseph Henry Thayer**, says that when **Sophia** is used of God, it refers to supreme intelligence such as belongs to God.

The word “*prudence*” is the translation of the Greek word **phronesis (fron’-ay-sis)**, which means “understanding, practical wisdom.” It refers to understanding, which leads to right action. We could say that **phronesis** (prudence) is the product of **Sophia** (wisdom). Prudence is the effective use of wisdom. This wisdom and this prudence are bestowed upon every individual who receives the grace of God.

I believe that the words “*wisdom and prudence*” are to be connected with “*the riches of His grace.*” It is my opinion that while the words “wisdom and prudence” may be applied to God, it is more fitting in this context to apply the words to ourselves. What Paul desires for us to understand is that all wisdom and prudence have come to us as a result of God’s grace.

What Paul is saying is that the riches of the grace of God toward us has not only resulted in the forgiveness of our sins, but they have abounded to such an extent that they have also resulted in our receiving the wisdom and prudence which are absolutely necessary if we are to understand the mystery of His will.

In verse **9** Paul writes, “*Having made known unto us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure which he hath purposed in himself.*” It is important for us to realize that God has not only purposed and planned our salvation from before the foundation of the world. He has revealed it to us also; it is a mystery that He has made known. In fact, this is the way in which the riches of God’s grace have abounded towards us. It has done so in all wisdom and prudence in order that we might have a knowledge and appreciation of the “*mystery of His will.*”

Brothers and sisters, this is not a light matter. Paul is here dealing with a fundamental issue. In fact, he is dealing with our approach to Christian salvation, about which there is so much controversy these days. The issue is this: how does an individual come to a knowledge and understanding of the eternal purposes of God, for Paul says it is a “*mystery?*”

The word “*mystery*” is a very important one in Paul’s letters. But before Paul ever used the word, our Lord Himself used it. Let us consider **Mark 4:1-17** in order to see the context in which He used it.

1 *The same day went Jesus out of the house, and sat by the sea side.*

2 *And great multitudes were gathered together unto him, so that he went into a ship, and sat; and the whole multitude stood on the shore.*

3 *And he spake many things unto them in parables, saying, Behold, a sower went forth to sow;*

4 *And when he sowed, some seeds fell by the way side, and the fowls came and devoured them up:*

5 *Some fell upon stony places, where they had not much earth: and forthwith they sprung up, because they had no deepness of earth:*

6 And when the sun was up, they were scorched; and because they had no root, they withered away.

7 And some fell among thorns; and the thorns sprung up, and choked them:

8 But other fell into good ground, and brought forth fruit, some an hundredfold, some sixtyfold, some thirtyfold.

9 Who hath ears to hear, let him hear.

10 And the disciples came, and said unto him, Why speakest thou unto them in parables?

11 He answered and said unto them, Because it is given unto you to know **the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven**, but to them it is not given.

12 For whosoever hath, to him shall be given, and he shall have more abundance: but whosoever hath not, from him shall be taken away even that he hath.

13 Therefore speak I to them in parables: because they seeing see not; and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand.

14 And in them is fulfilled the prophecy of Esaias, which saith, By hearing ye shall hear, and shall not understand; and seeing ye shall see, and shall not perceive:

15 For this people's heart is waxed gross, and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes they have closed; lest at any time they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears, and should understand with their heart, and should be converted, and I should heal them.

16 But blessed are your eyes, for they see: and your ears, for they hear.

17 For verily I say unto you, That many prophets and righteous men have desired to see those things which ye see, and have not seen them; and to hear those things which ye hear, and have not heard them.

In verses **10-17**, our Lord explains to His disciples His reason for teaching in parables. It is critical for us to recognize that the disciples did not understand the meaning of the parables. In that regard, they were no different from the multitudes. In Luke's account of the same event, we are told that after Jesus had finished the parable of the sower, "*his disciples asked him, saying, What might this parable be?*" (**Luke 8:9**)

In **Mark 4:10-13**, we have further evidence of the same:

10 And when he was alone, they that were about him with the twelve **asked of him the parable.**

11 And he said unto them, Unto you it is given to know the mystery of the kingdom of God: but unto **them that are without**, all these things are done in parables:

12 That seeing they may see, and not perceive; and hearing they may hear, and not understand; lest at any time they should be converted, and their sins should be forgiven them.

13 And he said unto them, Know ye not this parable? and how then will ye know all parables?

It was not until our Lord explained the meaning of the parable to the disciples that they understood it. The point is that the teaching concerning the Kingdom of heaven is a mystery and it is only revealed to His disciples. The multitude heard the same parables but they did not understand their meaning. It was a mystery to them that was never revealed.

As we said earlier, the apostle Paul uses the word in several of his letters. We shall examine some examples hereunder.

ROMANS 16:25-27

25 Now to him that is of power to stablish you according to my gospel, and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of **the mystery**, which was kept secret since the world began,

26 But now is made manifest, and by the scriptures of the prophets, according to the commandment of the everlasting God, made known to all nations for the obedience of faith:

27 To God only wise, be glory through Jesus Christ for ever. Amen.

1 CORINTHIANS 2:6-8

6 Howbeit we speak wisdom among them that are perfect: yet not the wisdom of this world, nor of the princes of this world, that come to nought:

*7 But we speak the wisdom of God in **a mystery**, even the hidden wisdom, which God ordained before the world unto our glory:*

8 Which none of the princes of this world knew: for had they known it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.

EPHESIANS 3:1-9

1 For this cause I Paul, the prisoner of Jesus Christ for you Gentiles,

2 If ye have heard of the dispensation of the grace of God which is given me to you-ward:

*3 How that by revelation he made known unto me **the mystery**; (as I wrote afore in few words,*

*4 Whereby, when ye read, ye may understand my knowledge in **the mystery** of Christ)*

5 Which in other ages was not made known unto the sons of men, as it is now revealed unto his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit;

6 That the Gentiles should be fellowheirs, and of the same body, and partakers of his promise in Christ by the gospel:

7 Whereof I was made a minister, according to the gift of the grace of God given unto me by the effectual working of his power.

8 Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints, is this grace given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ;

*9 And to make all men see what is the fellowship of **the mystery**, which from the beginning of the world hath been hid in God, who created all things by Jesus Christ.*

EPHESIANS 6:18-20

18 Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, and watching thereunto with all perseverance and supplication for all saints;

*19 And for me, that utterance may be given unto me, that I may open my mouth boldly, to make known **the mystery** of the gospel,*

20 For which I am an ambassador in bonds: that therein I may speak boldly, as I ought to speak.

COLOSSIANS 1:25-27

25 Whereof I am made a minister, according to the dispensation of God which is given to me for you, to fulfil the word of God;

*26 Even **the mystery** which hath been hid from ages and from generations, but now is made manifest to his saints:*

*27 To whom God would make known what is the riches of the glory of **this mystery** among the Gentiles; which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.*

COLOSSIANS 4:2-4

2 Continue in prayer, and watch in the same with thanksgiving;

*3 Withal praying also for us, that God would open unto us a door of utterance, to speak **the mystery** of Christ, for which I am also in bonds:*

4 That I may make it manifest, as I ought to speak.

The word “mystery” is a translation of the Greek word **musterion (moos-tay’-ree-on)**. In classical Greek, the word meant “a hidden thing, a secret, a mystery.” In New Testament, it means “the secret purposes and counsels which God intends to carry into effect in His kingdom.” It is something which is not understood until revealed, and when it is revealed, it is not difficult to understand by one who is enlightened by the Holy Spirit. The mystery of the redemption in Christ, which was the eternal plan of God, can be known to men and women only through revelation.

It is critical for us to appreciate that the term “*mystery*,” as it is used in the New Testament, does not mean something which is uncertain. Many Christians are of the view that all that is necessary for salvation and Christian growth is for individuals to have encounters or experiences with God, more often than not at an altar. These persons define a “*mystery*” as something that cannot be understood and is therefore, unimportant. Such thinking does great violence to what the New Testament means by the word “*mystery*.”

The word “*mystery*” in the New Testament, **does not** refer to something that can never be understood. But it **does** mean that it cannot be understood **without divine assistance**. It is a mystery in the sense that the human mind can never understand it as a result of its own efforts. But when it is revealed it is understood. In **1 Corinthians 2:6-13**, Paul makes this very clear:

6 *Yet when I am among mature believers, I do speak with words of wisdom, but not the kind of wisdom that belongs to this world or to the rulers of this world, who are soon forgotten.*

7 *No, the wisdom we speak of is the mystery of God-his plan that was previously hidden, even though he made it for our ultimate glory before the world began.*

8 *But the rulers of this world have not understood it; if they had, they would not have crucified our glorious Lord.*

9 *That is what the Scriptures mean when they say, “No eye has seen, no ear has heard, and no mind has imagined what God has prepared for those who love him.”*

10 *But it was to us that God revealed these things by his Spirit. For his Spirit searches out everything and shows us God’s deep secrets.*

11 *No one can know a person’s thoughts except that person’s own spirit, and no one can know God’s thoughts except God’s own Spirit.*

12 *And we have received God’s Spirit (not the world’s spirit), so we can know the wonderful things God has freely given us.*

13 *When we tell you these things, we do not use words that come from human wisdom. Instead, we speak words given to us by the Spirit, using the Spirit’s words to explain spiritual truths. (New Living Translation)*

In this passage, the apostle is repeating a truth stated by our Lord in **Matthew 11:25-26**: “*At that time Jesus answered and said, I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes. Even so, Father: for so it seemed good in thy sight.*” If we believe the words of Jesus then, we must acknowledge that God deliberately hides the truth from those who think themselves to be wise and clever, and it remains a mystery to them. He intentionally reveals the truth to the childlike in order that they may enjoy it and profit from it. In other words, the term “*mystery*” means that the great truths concerning God’s purpose and plan regarding salvation can only be known and understood when God reveals it. And Paul has told us that God has revealed it: “*He has showered his kindness on us, along with all wisdom and understanding. God has now revealed to us his mysterious will regarding Christ — which is to fulfill his own good plan*” (New Living Translation).

Paul tells us that the mystery of God’s will was made known unto us “*according to his good pleasure which he hath purposed in himself.*”

God has made known unto us “*the mystery of his will.*” The word “*will*” is the translation of a Greek word which does not refer to a desire based upon the reason, but to a desire based upon the emotions. God’s will or desire here, comes from His heart of love. This will or desire is “*according to His good pleasure.*” The words “*according to*” are the translation of the Greek word **kata**, meaning “down” and suggesting domination or control. This desire on God’s part is dominated or controlled by His good pleasure. The Greek word translated “*good pleasure,*” means “that which seems good or well” to one.

God's good pleasure, therefore, is not an arbitrary whim of a sovereign, but represents that which in the wisdom and love of God, would contribute most to the well-being and blessing of the saints. The delight, pleasure, and satisfaction which God has in blessing the saints is found in the fact that what He does for them is dictated by what is good for them.

This good pleasure is that "*which He hath purposed in Himself.*" The Greek word translated "*purposed*" means, "to determine." This good pleasure God purposed "*in Himself.*"

But why did God's heart overflow with such a great degree of love for vile, wretched sinners like you and me? **John Phillips**, in his commentary on **Ephesians**, says that "The answer can only be found in understanding the kind of God He is. He does what He does because He is who He is. He is a God of love and He wants us to be loving like Him. Moreover, He will never rest until we are."